



SDMS Doc ID 137883

Trouble On Tap

What's In
Sacramento's
Drinking
Water?

When Jake Parker developed a serious bone marrow infection last year, his mother, Lori, had no idea it might be linked to the water. The Parkers live next door to a Rancho Cordova well that was closed down in February due to the presence of 18 times as much perchlorate as the federal Environmental Protection Agency considers safe.

After he fell down in the driveway, Lori took 23-month-old Jake to the hospital for X-rays. Doctors didn't find anything, so they went home. But the problem did not go away.

"A week later, he was dragging his leg like a dead limb," Lori said. "He was pale. It was terrible."

Doctors finally found a bone marrow infection in Jake's shin. After many complications and three months of antibiotics, he got better.

The Parkers say they have reason to suspect perchlorate caused their son's health problem. And they aren't the only ones. Last Friday, 100 Rancho Cordova residents filed suit against two local aerospace companies linked to the introduction of perchlorate into their groundwater.

In doses thousands of times higher than those found in Rancho Cordova's tainted wells, perchlorate can cause diseases of the thyroid, blood and bone marrow. If the substance turns out to be toxic in low doses over longer periods of time, it could be the most shocking environmental bombshell of the decade, said environmental activist Jane Williams.

Perchlorate is a chemical component of fireworks, rocket fuel and matches. The highly soluble chemical travels freely in groundwater and no simple treatment method has been developed to remove it.

Since the closure of a number of Rancho Cordova wells last February, perchlorate has turned up all over the country. In Nevada, water flowing into Lake Mead has concentrations 100 times higher than the recommended safe levels. The lake was created by the damming of the Colorado River, which supplies drinking water to the Southwestern United States.

And perchlorate isn't the only toxin showing up in Sacramento area water (see related stories). A plume of cancer-causing chemicals from the county dump is threatening domestic wells near Rancho Murieta. The gasoline additive MTBE has turned up in groundwater and wells wherever gas stations are located. Leids remains an ever pre-

sent threat to the safety of tap water. And the presence of nitrates has recently led to the closure of public drinking water wells in Davis.

Watch That Water

Chances are, the majority of Sacramentans are drinking safe water. But as residents like Larry Ladd have found out, sometimes it pays to start asking questions.

Ladd, a geographer who lives in Rancho Cordova, stumbled onto the perchlorate situation when investigating the boundary of the Folsom Cordova school district split. He discovered that a toxic plume, the legacy of years of chemical dumping, was creeping southwestward through the groundwater from the nearby

Aerojet General Corp. plant.

Under orders from the state, Aerojet has been filtering carcinogenic chemicals such as trichloroethylene (TCE) from the contaminated groundwater plume since the mid-1980s and reinjecting the water into the aquifer just upstream from Rancho Cordova. But the treatment Aerojet uses to remove other chemicals doesn't remove perchlorate. As a result, the company continues to put water that is contaminated with up to 450 times the recommended safe concentration of perchlorate back into the ground at the rate of 8 million gallons per day.

Edie Cartwright, vice president of communications for Aerojet, said the company is doing what state officials have ordered it to do.

"What do you do with 8 million gallons [of treated water] per day?" she

said. "There's no immediate way to clean it up."

Although perchlorate is relatively new as a health concern, the chemical itself is certainly not new to Sacramento's groundwater. The chemical has been detected at 1,000 times the recommended safe concentration in Aerojet wells since the 1950s and in public wells since at least the late 1970s. Aerojet's own labs found high levels of perchlorate in one of Rancho Cordova's public wells in 1993.

The only people who really didn't know about it were the people who were drinking it, Ladd said.

State regulators overseeing the Aerojet cleanup were also in the dark because, as part of its state-mandated cleanup order, Aerojet was in charge of monitoring its own wells for perchlorate. It wasn't until about a year ago that regulators realized that Aerojet's testing method was sensitive only to a level of 400 parts per billion (ppb), far in excess of EPA's recommended safe dose of no more than 18 ppb.

Within a matter of weeks, the state Department of Health Services laboratories developed a much more sensitive test that detected perchlorate in public wells all over Rancho Cordova.

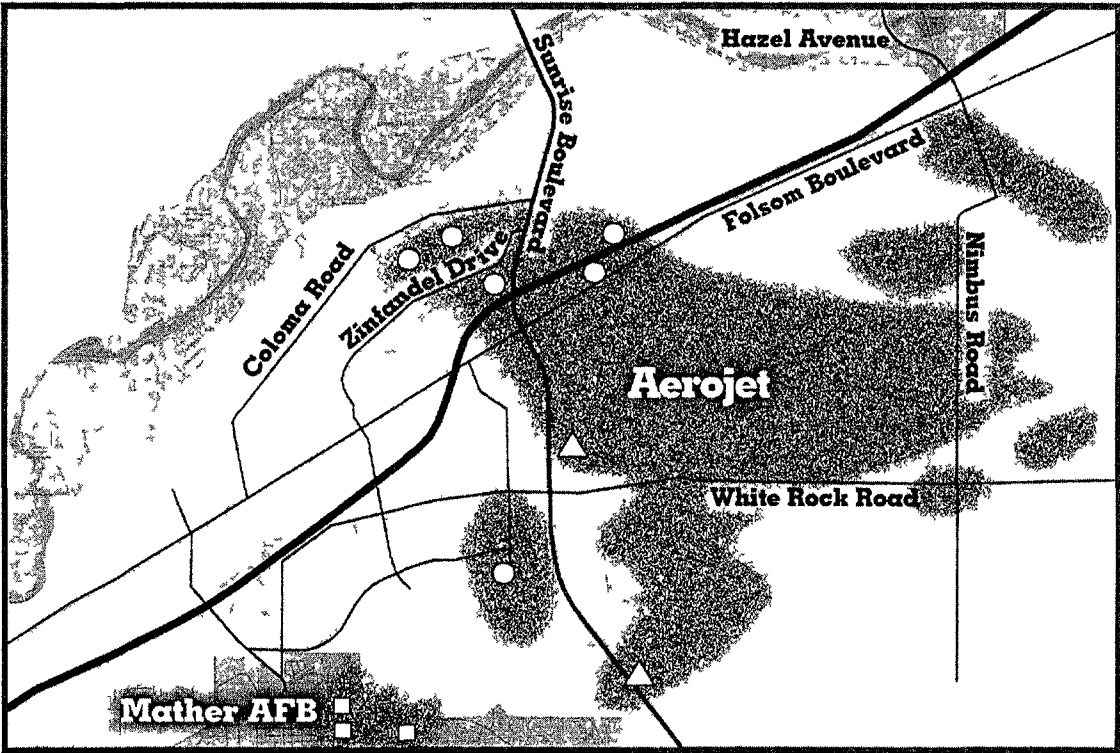
No one knows if chronic, long-term exposure to perchlorate is hazardous because that type of exposure has not been studied.

In high doses, perchlorate can cause some pretty nasty health problems. At 1,000 times the recommended safe dosage for drinking,

Lori Parker believes the tap water in her neighborhood is the cause of her son Jake's medical problems.



BY AMY PARIS
PHOTOS BY LARRY DALTON



No one knows if chronic, long-term exposure to perchlorate is hazardous because that type of exposure has not been studied.

water. It can cause fatal blood and bone marrow disorders. Because of its action as an endocrine disrupter, perchlorate might be linked to breast cancer or leukemia, according to Health Department toxicologist Marilyn Underwood. It can also interfere with development of the nervous system.

The chemical was used in the past as a treatment for Graves' disease, a thyroid disorder. Perchlorate inhibits the secretion of thyroid hormones, effectively slowing down the metabolism. People treated with perchlorate have reported stomach aches and skin rashes.

Almost nothing is known about the effects of perchlorate on children or developing fetuses. In general, children are more sensitive to chemical contaminants than adults.

Jake Parker isn't the only member of his family to have suffered unexplained health problems after drinking water from the tap. His 6-year-old sister has had many health problems, including anemia. And Lori Parker suffered two miscar-

riages in 1992. That same year, three other women on her street had miscarriages, she said.

Attorney Ed Masry filed suit Dec. 5 in Sacramento County Superior Court against Aerojet and McDonnell Douglas, an aerospace company recently purchased by Boeing, as well as several local water utilities, on behalf of about 100 Rancho Cordova area residents complaining of health problems allegedly caused by the contaminated water. About 25 of the plaintiffs complain of thyroid conditions, while the remaining 75 have suffered various other afflictions, including cancer. The Parkers told SN&R they had not heard of the suit, but intended to contact the attorney.

Preliminary studies of hospital records that looked for unusual numbers of blood disorders, breast cancer, leukemia and babies born with severe thyroid problems among people living in areas affected by perchlorate have all turned up negative, according to Underwood. But the health department is a long way from isolating exactly who was exposed to the chemical, and even farther from determining what health effects were caused by that exposure, she said.

Perchlorate Politics

In the quest to establish a drinking water standard for perchlorate, the financial stakes are high.

The EPA decided in 1992 that it

(continued on next page)

North Sac: Got Lead?

Many Sacramentans may unknowingly be consuming hazardous levels of lead in their drinking water. In a random sampling of tap water, city of Sacramento water authorities found that many residents were drinking hazardous levels of lead, as much as nine times what federal authorities consider safe.

Two rounds of tap water testing in 1992 detected lead in 86 and 89 percent of house holds in the northern part of the city of Sacramento that get their water from a public well system. No follow up testing has been done since then.

On the whole, Sacramento water samples were within EPA guidelines. But since lead contamination depends in some measure on the condition and chemical composition of each household's plumbing, residents should not assume their water is safe.

Lead is the leading environmental hazard for children, according to a recently released report from the National Resources Defense Council. Drinking water makes up about 20 percent of an average adult's exposure to lead and up to 85 percent for some bottle-fed infants.

People who live in houses built between 1982 and 1986 are at an increased risk for lead exposure because during those years, most copper pipes were soldered with lead. Brass faucets, which can legally contain up to 8 percent lead by weight, are leading contributors of lead to tap water.

Adding fluoride to water doubles its lead content by making the water more corrosive, according to EPA toxicologist Bill Marcus. Only a small number of Sacramentans in the Rosemont area have fluoridated water, but recent legislation has made countywide fluoridation an imminent possibility.

Lead makes you stupid, and that might be the nicest thing that it does. In addition to impairing mental and physical development, it can increase blood pressure and damage hearing, and at very high levels can cause anemia, kidney damage and mental retardation. Consumption of lead by pregnant women directly exposes the developing fetus, and can result in low birth weight and premature birth.

Running water for up to three minutes or until it becomes cold, especially the first time you use it in the morning, reduces lead levels by clearing stale water out from the pipes. Also, using cold water for cooking reduces lead exposure, since lead is more soluble in hot water. Boiling water does not remove lead.

The only way to find out for sure if lead is in your tap water is to have it tested by a state or EPA certified lab. Tests cost from \$15 to \$35, and the EPA Drinking Water Hotline (1-800-426-4791) can help you locate a certified lab in your area.

—A.P.

PHOTOGRAPH BY

did not have enough information about perchlorate to establish an enforceable drinking water standard so instead it established a recommended safe dose of 4 parts per billion (ppb). By this time, Aerojet had already found almost 10,000 times this concentration in its own monitoring wells.

Aerojet and a group of businesses that manufacture and use perchlorate, fearing responsibility for an enormous and costly cleanup, formed the benignly named Perchlorate Study Group to pressure the EPA to relax its reference dose.

In 1995, the group got the EPA to expand the standard to 4.18 ppb, but considering they were shooting for much higher levels (at least 400 ppb), it was not the coup they had hoped for.

The EPA refused to reconsider the reference dose without conducting more studies. The Perchlorate Study Group and the Air Force—two groups that stand to bear the financial responsibility of cleanup—volunteered to fund studies to fill in the information gaps. The studies, which are already under way, could have a substantial effect on the determination of an EPA drinking water standard.

The Air Force is funding a series of toxicity tests to convince the world that perchlorate is good



for you," said Jane Williams, director of the California Communities Against Toxics. There's an incestuous relationship there. They've been funding their own tests, hiring their own toxicologists, putting their own scientists on peer review panels. There is no public advocacy group watching the level changes. It's being done in the dark.

Taking scientific research as a hostage in the battle over cleanup costs is not unique to the perchlorate situation.

Larry Ladd and his daughter, Melody.

For example, last April, when federal government researchers invited Sacramento to participate in one of the most comprehensive groundwater studies ever undertaken, the city initially refused to participate. The reason? Officials wanted a guarantee they wouldn't be held liable for cleanup costs should new contamination be found. City government changed its mind only when local media coverage incited a

moderate amount of public outrage.

Since state regulators became aware of perchlorate in Sacramento area wells last February, a total of eight wells have been taken out of service, and three more were initially closed and have since reopened.

Hardest hit was Arden Cordova Water Service, which shut down three wells showing levels from 140 to 320 ppb. Three more wells that are within the safe dosage range were initially taken offline and returned to service when the summer peak water

demand came. Another well with levels within the safe range was put on standby in November.

Two wells in the county of Sacramento's Sunrise Boulevard service area are contaminated with 92 and 280 ppb, respectively. The wells are on standby, which means they kick in only in periods of high demand. One well pumped nearly 2 million gallons in May alone. The other pumped more than 120,000 gallons in August. Customers were notified of possible exposure.

In addition, two wells on Mather Air Force Base have been closed down, and a third is near the safety limit.

Anyone using private wells in the area of the plume (see map, p. 15) should contact local health authorities, said Dave Lancaster of the Department of Health Services. Water from the city of Sacramento to Fair Oaks and Folsom South Canal has not been contaminated.

A neighborhood served by Citizens Utilities is directly in the path of the plume, and the company has turned off one well because it detected trace amounts of perchlorate. The company has already been hit by a trichloroethylene-containing plume from Mather Air Force Base.

The plume is moving our way, and we're watching it closely, said Robert Roscoe, managing engineer for Citizens Utilities. It's like being

tied to a railroad track and seeing a single light off in the distance. We'd not be doing a good job planning our water supply if we weren't planning for it.

Who Pays?

So far, Aerojet has paid an estimated \$3 million, \$5 million for numerous interconnections between water systems and additional storage reservoirs to reduce the level of perchlorate in local water.

Some officials say Aerojet considers it the Air Force's responsibility to pay the company back, at least in part, since the Air Force played a large role in perchlorate contamination. Edie Cartwright, vice president of communications for Aerojet, would only say that the company is in negotiations with the Air Force.

In addition, if the EPA's recommended dose is raised, local water purveyors might have to compensate Aerojet for work done on their systems.

They picked up the cost for these projects, and if the safe level is actually above what's in the wells, they're probably going to negotiate for reimbursement, said John Coppola of the Sacramento County Water Resources Division.

But the real costs are not going to come from piecemeal system improvements. A treatment plant

Weird Taste, Less Filling

Some politicians think Sacramento's water is not only good enough to drink, it's good enough to bottle and sell. But due to widespread contamination by a gasoline additive, the water may soon begin to taste a little bit funny.

The secret ingredient, MTBE (methyl tertiary butyl ether), a fuel oxygenate that has been found in wells and groundwater all over Sacramento County at levels that exceed the recommended safe concentration. So far, the substance has not shown up in public drinking water supplies, but officials say it is just a matter of time.

At low levels, within safe dosage ranges, you can begin to taste and smell the substance. It smells a lot like a gas station, according to water quality officials.

And at high levels, scientists suspect the substance can cause cancer. Exposure to MTBE can also cause headaches, breathing difficulties, nausea, rashes, nosebleeds, eye irritation and dizziness.

The fuel additive, which composes up to 15 percent of gasoline, is highly soluble in water, migrates quickly through soil and is extremely difficult to remove.

Congress mandated addition of oxygenates to gasoline in 1990 before ascertaining its effects on groundwater. The gasoline companies were happy to oblige because MTBE is a byproduct of the refining process.

The oxygenate was added to gasoline to reduce emissions, but recently Chevron Corp. became the second major refiner in a month to withdraw its endorsement of the additive, saying that oxygenates do little to reduce smog and that gas companies can meet emissions standards without oxygenates.

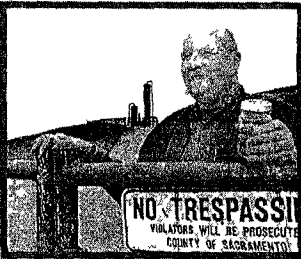
Once thought to get into the ground mainly through leaking fuel tanks, MTBE is now known to pass through pipe seals into the soil, according to Steve Bond, a geologist for the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board. Rain also washes the chemical into surface waters.

Denver was one of the first cities to add MTBE to its gas in the late 1980s. A recent study found detectable levels of the additive in 79 percent of the city's shallow urban wells.

Recently, the Sacramento City Council voted to bottle and sell an extra-purified version of Sacramento tap water to community-based groups who will then be able to sell it for profit.

Denver water officials say they have no similar plans.

—A.P.



George Waegell

locate there, according to George Waegell, a resident whose property is in the path of the plume.

We put the landfill in the wrong place, said Waegell. You could throw a rock anywhere in the county and it would be better.

Vicki Kretsinger, a groundwater consultant for the county, concedes it might not have been the best place to put a dump, given the geological attributes of the area.

The boundaries of the plume are not well known because there are not enough monitoring wells, said John Moody, an engineer for the State Water Quality Control Board, who oversees the Kiefer Boulevard site. In the worst-case scenario, the plume is threatening to extend beyond the landfill site to the south, if it hasn't already done so, he said.

I'm not comfortable with it, Moody said. I don't have the data that I'd like to have. There's no question we need better monitoring ability.

There are at least 41 domestic drinking water wells, and another 25 agricultural wells used for irrigation within about a mile of the property line to the south and west of landfill.

Directly under the 165-acre unlined portion of the landfill, cancer-causing chemicals have been measured at almost 50 times the EPA's drinking water standard. One monitoring well, which is about 1,000 feet inside the Kiefer property line, showed eight times the legal limit of trichloroethylene (TCE), a known human carcinogen.

The county is currently pumping contaminated water from the plume, treating the contamination, and discharging the treated water into Deer Creek. It has installed a system to collect and eliminate landfill gases, which are the main contributors to groundwater pollution from dumps, according to landfill consultant G. Fred Lee. The county is embarking on a third phase of treatment that officials expect to entirely contain the plume.

The county has bought almost 1,000 acres from landowners Tony Dutra and Angelo Tsakopoulos, at a cost of \$13 million, to expand monitoring capabilities and establish a "buffer zone" between the dump and residential areas. Officials are continuing plans to expand the landfill—a move local citizens think is a big mistake.

We have absolutely no faith in their program whatsoever, James said. At this point, we don't have a problem with our water. But if we don't stay with [county officials], we will be drinking contaminated water for a year or two before we know about it.

The county has a cash cow in the landfill, Waegell said. It's sinking into the aquifer, and future generations are going to pay for it.

—A.P.

that will extract and treat water at the contamination site is being developed at an estimated cost of \$210 million. It is scheduled to begin operation next April.

Until that time, under state orders, Aerojet will continue to reinject water containing perchlorate into the aquifer. Although the planned treatment is intended to stop the reintroduction of contaminated water, it will do nothing for the fringes of the plume, which have already spread over Rancho Cordova and are heading southwest. If EPA establishes a drinking water standard that is as low as the current recommended dose, water purveyors will have to find a way to treat individual wells. That technology is years away, Regional Water Quality Control Board officials say. Meanwhile the spread of perchlorate could threaten other wells and further tax the already burdened drinking water supply.

The Parkers, who have lived in Rancho Cordova for 11 years, aren't sticking around to see how it all turns out.

"We're putting our house on the market," Lori said. "We don't want to live here any more. It's scary being near Aerojet. Buffalo Creek—who knows what they might have washed through there? There have been a lot of unexplained health problems."

Safe Water Tips

Simple things you can do to make your water safer:

- **BOILING WATER** will kill bacteria and cryptosporidium, a microscopic parasite. This is especially recommended for people with weakened immune systems. Do not boil water served to infants for more than a minute because this can concentrate lead and nitrates.
- **RUNNING THE TAP** for between 30 seconds and three minutes or until the water is cold, especially the first time you use each faucet each day, reduces the amount of lead in the water. Use cold tap water for drinking, cooking and making ice since lead is more soluble in hot water.

• **REDUCE SHOWER TIME** and ventilate your bathroom well. Inhaling fumes from compounds that evaporate easily is a common pathway of exposure to some organic contaminants.

• **MANY HOME FILTRATION DEVICES** are unregulated. Look for NSF (National Sanitation Foundation) certification for the specific contaminant you want to treat.

• **BOTTLED WATER IS OFTEN NO SAFER THAN TAP WATER**, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council.

oil. It can be a good solution if you know your tap water is contaminated. But it is not regulated any more strictly.

• **GET IN TOUCH WITH YOUR PUBLIC WATER PROVIDER** and request monitoring results for both regulated and unregulated contaminants. Ask them to explain the results. Request copies of any notices of violations sent out during the past couple of years. Find out the source of your water, and note whether there are any obvious contamination risks nearby.

• **IF YOUR WATER IS CONTAMINATED**, ask your water utility, state regulators, the EPA and elected representatives to clean it up.

source: National Resources Defense Council, 1997

Davis: Not Quite Calistoga

Some people pay for mineral water. In Davis, it flows from people's taps.

"If we were to bottle and sell the water, it would have to be labeled as mineral water," said Bob Schoech of the city's Department of Public Works. The water contains levels of dissolved solids that generally exceed EPA's taste and smell guidelines, although they don't usually exceed safety limits.

Some say the water is "enriched." Others endow it with magical powers.

"I've had people call and say the water turns their oatmeal green," Schoech said. "Some things you can explain, and some things you can't. In that case, I recommended they switch brands of oatmeal."

Its purported supernatural powers notwithstanding, Davis' water poses some health concerns worth keeping in mind. The water contains high levels of nitrates, chromium and selenium. Although the water is within EPA guidelines for all of these materials, some wells are currently shut down, or have been taken offline in the past due to high levels of contamination. Public Works officials say the risk of exposure from any one Davis well is relatively low because water from different wells blends together in the pipes.

The level of nitrates, a component of fertilizer, is on the rise in Davis' drinking water supply, and although current levels are within EPA standards, trouble is on the horizon, according to two groundwater researchers at the University of California, Davis.

In a 1993 study, Robert Criss and Lee Davisson found that 80 percent of water being pumped from the ground in Davis hasn't been there very long. Most of Davis' groundwater is agricultural returns—

water used to irrigate crops—which has seeped back down into the aquifer. Fertilizer, in the form of anhydrous ammonia, is dissolved into the irrigation water. When this water seeps back into the ground, it carries with it elevated levels of nitrates.

"We are mining groundwater and artificially, inadvertently, recharging it with poor-quality water," Davisson said.

Earlier this year, one well had to be closed because at 51 parts per million (ppm) the nitrate level exceeded the EPA drinking water standard of 45 ppm. Wells in service register nitrate levels ranging from 2.6 to 39 ppm.

Infants under six months of age can develop "blue baby syndrome" from consuming high levels of nitrates. Symptoms include a bluish color around the lips, which spreads to fingers, toes, face and, eventually, the entire body. If left untreated, the condition can be fatal.

Nitrates are very difficult and costly to filter out of the water, said Schoech. An ion exchange treatment method would cost \$500,000 per well and would require more space than available near residential wells. Davis Public Works is fitting several wells with new seals in an attempt to keep nitrates out.

Criss said that the only way to reverse the problem is to stop wasting water and fertilizer.

"There's no question that we are overusing these resources," Criss said. "We don't put any economic value on the quality of the environment. If that were factored into the price of fertilizer, than we would use less."

One well recently registered levels of chromium that exceeded the EPA drinking water standard. The Department of Public Works had the well retested, and the second time was within range.

Chromium is a naturally occurring metal. It can get into water from runoff from old mining operations and improper waste disposal from plating operations.

Levels of chromium exceeding EPA standards can cause health effects such as liver and kidney damage, dermatitis and respiratory problems. Davis wells generally have chromium levels at about one half the legal limit.

Selenium, a naturally occurring element, was considered a problem in Davis' water supply until the EPA relaxed its drinking water standard in 1994. In 1993, almost half of Davis' wells were at or above recommended levels. Since the standard was changed, all the wells are in compliance, said Schoech.

Levels of selenium are now generally less than half of the EPA drinking water standard. The amount of selenium in a liter of Davis' drinking water is less than the amount in one 5-ounce serving of broccoli.

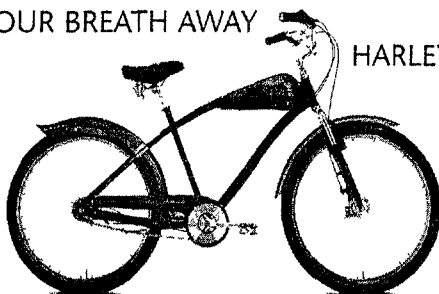
Although a trace of selenium in the diet is essential, too much of it can cause symptoms such as severe nausea, loss of hair and nails, and the formation of skin lesions.

Unless you are extraordinarily thirsty, there is little cause for worry. To overdose, you would have to consume about 5 milligrams of selenium in a day, which translates into about 22 gallons of water.

—A.P.

"I've had people call and say the water turns their oatmeal green. Some things you can explain, and some things you can't. In that case, I recommended they switch brands of oatmeal."

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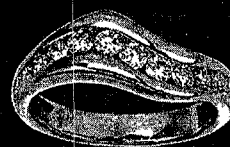
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SACRAMENTO'S NEWS AND ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY / VOLUME 9 NO 36 / THURSDAY DECEMBER 11 1997

ON THE COVER

Trouble On Tap 16

Perchlorate seeping underground in Rancho Cordova; nitrates and chromium in Davis wells; MTBE in groundwater wherever gas stations are located; too much lead in drinking water all over town. Here's your chance to find out more than you may want to know about Sacramento's drinking water.

By Amy Paris

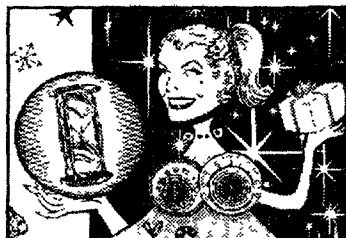
Cover Photo by Larry Dalton
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Last-Minute Gift Guide pullout

If you procrastinated this year on the holiday gift-buying thing, here's a shopping guide that may finally get you in gear.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Water And Crud

When it comes to water, we've got two things working against us as a society.

First of all, we use a lot of it. Really, a lot of it. A single American family uses more water in a week to flush the toilet than a whole tribe of Bedouin uses in a month for drinking, cooking, washing, watering the lawn, etc.

The second thing is we use lots and lots of other substances that fall under the technical rubric of crud. Included in this sweeping category are many of our favorite things: agricultural poisons, chemical fertilizers, petroleum distillates ... the list is endless. And the one thing all of these substances have in common is that we dump them on the ground.

One of the most comical things about our species is that we don't seem to know that the ground is also where our water lives when it's not being used to make coffee or flush toilets. In a way, it's not surprising. We're like the kid who's never seen a cow and thinks milk comes from the grocery store. Whenever we do see some water coming from anywhere other than the tap or a plastic bottle, it's coming from the sky, not the ground. Of course, the sky is the other place we tend to dump a lot of crud.

Considering all the crud that's seeping into our groundwater, it's a wonder we're not all mutants. In a way, it's a tribute to the brave souls who provide us our drinking water that they're able to produce anything that they even think is *sort of safe*. But as this week's cover story ("Trouble On Tap," page 16) points out, the situation may be getting out of hand.

Maybe it's wake-up time. You can give up a lot of things, but you can't give up water. The muck stops here.

—BOB VAN EYKEN

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